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SUBJECT: WOMEN ACTIVISTS PRESS FOR INTERNATIONAL SUPPORT ON
GENDER ISSUES

SUMMARY

1. (SBU) Prominent members of the Iraqi Women's Movement discussed the political and economic concerns of Iraqi women at a seminar aimed at encouraging international support for the participation of Iraqi women in the democratic transitional process. The roundtable discussion included female members of Parliament and Iraqi NGO directors, representatives from the international diplomatic community and UNAMI. The conference focused on a general assessment of the Iraqi political scene and revision of the Constitution, the women's quota in the upcoming elections, violence against women, obtaining support for Iraqi civil society movements, and the role women play in building peace and security. Some of the women noted that women parliamentarians and activists need to unite their efforts in order to serve the interests of all Iraqi women. END SUMMARY.

WOMEN KEY TO BUILDING PEACE AND STABILITY

2. (SBU) At a June 23 roundtable discussion held in partnership with UNDP, prominent Iraqi women presented their views on what they consider the most urgent issues facing women in Iraq. The Iraqi participants included Minister of Environment and Acting Minister of State for Women's Affairs Narmin Othman; MP and Chair of the Iraqi Independent Women's Group (IIWG) Maysoon Al-Damluji; MP and Head of the Civil Society Commission in the Council of Representatives (CoR) Alaa Talabani; the President's Advisor on Women's Affairs, Ms. Salma Jaboo; General Secretary of the Al-Amal (Hope) Association NGO; Hanaa Edwar; Al-Amal Association Projects Manager Basma Al-Khateeb; and Chair of Women for Peace NGO Shatha Naji. Foreign participants included the Ambassadors of Japan and the Netherlands; UNAMI Human Rights Officers, and Embassies.

3. (SBU) Minister Othman led off the discussion by highlighting the need for practical solutions to Iraq's political and economic problems, because stability depends on solving these problems. Noting the conflict between differing ideological beliefs, Othman stated that even though violence had decreased, most of the current solutions were military, rather than political, and this marginalized women in establishing peace and security. Othman referred to a conflict of beliefs in the GOI and the lack of a united GOI strategy. Various strategies, which reflected the personal beliefs of those in charge of the various ministries, stalled progress in building a united, stable Iraq. Othman deplored the lack of agreement even on what democracy is (should be) in Iraq, rhetorically asking: "Is it Islamic democracy, or secular, liberal democracy?" Nevertheless, Othman expressed confidence that in spite of conflicting views, she believes the situation will to some extent stabilize following elections.

STRUGGLING FOR A WOMEN'S QUOTA

¶4. (SBU) MP Maysoon Al-Damluji spoke out in support of designating 25 percent of seats for women in the Iraqi Parliament, as stipulated by the Iraqi Constitution. The Iraqi Federal Supreme Court further stipulates in a 2007 letter that a 25 percent women's quota must exist in all legislative councils, including provincial councils, and this is also stated in Article 50 of the draft provincial elections bill. However, the mechanism to implement this presents challenges. How to fill at least a quarter of provincial council seats in the upcoming provincial elections using an open list system remains one of several unresolved issues in the ongoing CoR debate over the provincial election law. Al-Damluji called upon the international community to support the women's quota by openly expressing views in support of the quota and by supporting female candidates in all provinces.

ARTICLE 41: WOMEN'S RIGHTS STUMBLING BLOCK

¶5. (SBU) Hanaa Edwar, Narmin Othman and nearly all of Iraqi women present, called for the removal of the controversial Article 41 from the Iraq Constitution. (Note: Article 41 states Iraqis are free in their commitment to their personal status according to their religions, sects, beliefs, or choices, and this shall be regulated by law. End note) Edwar stressed the necessity of eliminating all references to religion and sects in matters regarding personal status. In her view, the judicial system was weakened by the possibility of religious authorities interfering in matters of personal status, such as divorce, polygamy, and the minimum

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age for marriage; issues over which there were disputes within some religions. Furthermore, Article 41 disregarded international conventions on human rights.

VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN HARMS ALL IRAQIS

¶6. (SBU) Salma Jaboo deplored the increasing violence against Iraqi women and society's silence surrounding the issue, which was exacerbated by all the other problems facing Iraqis. She noted women are still vulnerable to political violence and generally excluded from decisionmaking and high positions. Social violence in the form of domestic violence hit Iraqi women particularly hard since they could not trust the security forces to aid them when violated. Iraqi laws blatantly violated women's rights by not offering protection against domestic violence and honor killings. (Note: Recently, after KRG PM Nechirvan intervened, an order was issued to consider honor killings as first degree murder in Kurdistan. End note.) According to Jaboo, urban militias and the general lack of law and order allowed human trafficking and prostitution to flourish, while educated, middle class women were forced to emigrate. Jaboo also characterized the plight of the estimated one million widows in Iraq as a form of violence against women.

CIVIL SOCIETY ADVANCING

¶7. (SBU) Alaa Talabani, chair of the Civil Society Committee in the CoR was elated, having recently received word from PM Maliki's office that it will issue a recommendation for the draft civil society law to be considered by the Shura Council. Talabani said she is confident that the law will eventually be passed by the CoR and asked attendees to express support for the law when engaging GOI contacts. Talabani is keen to dissolve the Ministry for Civil Society and establish a civil society commission in its place. She believes such a commission, if staffed by qualified, competent people, will be more capable of promoting and regulating NGOs and civil society in Iraq.

GENDER ISSUES REQUIRE SPECIAL ATTENTION

18. (SBU) Basma Al-Khateeb proposed that diplomatic missions to Iraq appoint gender advisors to their staff to follow up on International Compact on Iraq (ICI) objectives and commitments. Al-Khateeb noted that GOI institutions lacked expert staff (partially due to the emigration of qualified people) and operated without credible development strategies. Development and capacity building programs needed to be gender sensitized in order to optimize the role women could play in building peace and security.

UNITED EFFORTS CAN ACHIEVE MORE FOR IRAQI WOMEN

19. (SBU) In the open discussion that followed, UNAMI and EU participants highlighted their work in support of Iraqi women. The EU representative noted that in the agreement the EU is currently negotiating with the GOI, special mention is made of the need to strengthen the role of Iraqi women in both public and private life. UNAMI noted that it is preparing reports on gender-based violence in Iraq. Narmine Othman observed that only five percent of women in the CoR speak up and make their presence felt. She stated that even if Iraqi women achieve a 25 percent quota in all legislative councils, women legislators will not make a difference for all Iraqi women unless they actively exploit their presence in government. Furthermore, some female politicians were loyal to their party leadership, regardless of its stance on women's rights. Alaa Talabani noted that until now efforts to form a CoR women's caucus had been unsuccessful; she attributed this to the widely varying backgrounds of female CoR members and disagreement over how to deal with gender-related issues.

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